

**Inside the School**

# **Five Tips for Working with Difficult Parents**

By Joanna Marx-Talarczyk

## **Special Report**

# Inside the School

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## Contact Information

Inside the School  
2718 Dryden Drive  
Madison, WI 53704  
800-433-0499 ext. 2  
[support@magnapubs.com](mailto:support@magnapubs.com)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>5 Tips for Working with Difficult parents</b> .....	<b>2</b>
Refuse to talk about other students .....	4
Give parents time to vent or cool down .....	5
Refuse to be intimidated .....	6
Take responsibility when it's your fault .....	7
Pull, don't push .....	8

# 5 TIPS FOR WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS

According to a Harvard Graduate School Survey in 2005, about 500,000 teachers—or one out of every six teachers—leave the profession every year. Forty to 50 percent of teachers who leave within their first five years cite parent management as a top reason, according to the Consortium for Policy Research in Education. New teachers not only see parent-teacher communication as one of their biggest challenges, but also feel it is the area in which they are least prepared, according to a 2005 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher.

“Of course teachers don’t take courses in parent management and some teachers report that working with parents, especially demanding parents, can be intimidating,” said Suzanne Tingley, adjunct professor for the State University of New York in the Department of Education. “So what they try to do is avoid any interaction with parents whenever possible.”

According to Tingley, author of *How to Handle Difficult Parents: a Teacher’s Survival Guide*, teacher-parent interaction is a growing topic of interest for teachers, administrators and parents alike.

“I think today’s parents [are concerned about parent-teacher interaction] because if you’ve been in the field of education for any length of time, you know the relationship between home and school has changed significantly over the years,” Tingley said.

Tingley doesn’t suggest that parents never defend their kids, but according to her, 20 years ago if she had to call parents about their child who was in trouble, she felt confident that the parents would

support her. Today, if she had to make the same call, she thinks that half the time parents would be supportive, while the other half of the time, they would make excuses for their child.

In Tingley's online seminar, *Dealing with Difficult Parents: Face to Face*, Tingley shared strategies on how teachers can improve communication. Here are five ways teachers can start better dealing with parents today.

## **REFUSE TO TALK ABOUT OTHER STUDENTS**

Sometimes parents try to shift responsibility from their children onto other children. According to Tingley, it's important that teachers don't allow that to happen.

If John won't stop talking while the teacher is talking, then John's mother might want to blame Lucy, the student to whom her child was talking. John's mother insists John was just being polite. The teacher should refocus the conversation on John. Say something like "We're talking about John right now."

"There are lots of reasons why you shouldn't talk about someone else's kids," Tingley said. "You wouldn't want to be Lucy's parent in this, so you really need to not allow parents to shift the blame or shift responsibility to someone else."

## **GIVE PARENTS TIME TO VENT OR COOL DOWN**

When a teacher needs to talk to a parent about a student's grade or a disciplinary issue, but the parent is more concerned about a different issue, the teacher needs to resolve it before moving on to what she wanted to talk about.

Tingley uses a student's poor math grade as an example. A teacher calls a parent in to talk about the bad grade, but the parent says that her child is unhappy with math since the teacher didn't choose her for the Math Olympics.

"Now I'm here to tell you that you're not going to be talking about her math grade until you talk about what happened at the Math Olympics," Tingley said. "You have to show some recognition, some acknowledgement of the issue that the parent is concerned about before you can go on and talk about your thing."

## **REFUSE TO BE INTIMIDATED**

This is one of Tingley's favorites. Don't allow a parent to define a teacher's role. For example, if a teacher suggests that a parent should have a more active role in a child's education, don't let a parent intimidate you by saying "Isn't that your job? Are you saying you can't do your job?"

"It can be intimidating. There's no question that it can be intimidating," Tingley said. "You need to have this firmly in your head that you do your job and you are responsible for the pieces that you need to be responsible for. The parents need to be responsible for their part as well."

## **TAKE RESPONSIBILITY WHEN IT'S YOUR FAULT**

Teachers don't always do the right thing, but it's best to own up to mistakes.

Tingley's example is of a teacher who read students' grades aloud in class. The kids teased one of the students with a low grade. Don't say, "Maybe next time she'll study harder" when confronting the upset parent. Instead say, "I'm so sorry, I don't know what I was thinking, it will never happen again."

"So far I've given examples of parents who are somewhat unreasonable, but there are times when what we've done was not right," Tingley said. "And the best thing to do instead of being defensive is to just say 'You know what? I shouldn't have done that and I'm really sorry.'"

## **PULL, DON'T PUSH**

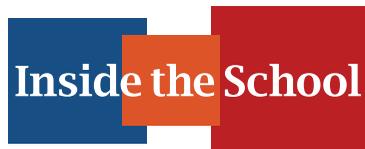
When parents want to be involved, let them. Not allowing them the opportunity to participate makes parents feel excluded.

“This goes a little bit with creating unhappy parents when we don’t need to do that,” Tingley said. “[Parents feel] that you really don’t want them to have anything to do, that maybe even something’s going on in your classroom that you don’t want them to know about.”

Tingley suggests thinking of something specific to give parents to do, like reading to the class once a week.

Not talking about other students, giving parents the time to calm down, refusing to be intimidated, taking responsibility when it’s appropriate and getting parents involved, will help teachers cultivate more positive interactions with parents. According to Tingley, kids benefit when parents and teachers get along.

“For many kids, the two big authority figures in their lives are their parents and their teachers and they really want the two sides to get along,” Tingley said. “When they don’t, at the very least it’s uncomfortable for the child and confusing. For the most part, kids really want to please both.”



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